



## **Students Deserve an Equitable, Fully Funded Public School System**

**IDRA Testimony Submitted to the Georgia Senate Study Committee to Review Education Funding Mechanisms on August 19, 2022**

Dear Chairman Dugan and Honorable Members of the Committee:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Mikayla Arciaga, M.A.Ed., and I am the Education Policy Fellow for IDRA, an independent, non-partisan, education non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. We commend this committee for assessing education funding mechanisms and hope that you will engage in this exercise through an equity lens. That would mean that the committee would ensure that students having the most challenges receive the most support, particularly those students who have been historically marginalized like students of color, those living in rural communities, and those with limited economic resources.

Nearly one in five school age children in Georgia are living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), yet Georgia is one of only six states that fails to provide additional funding for students living in poverty (ECS, 2021). This particularly impacts students of color, specifically Black students living in Georgia's Black Belt, who are more likely to be in families with limited economic resources, taught by more inexperienced, out-of-field teachers and with less access to advanced coursework (Owens, 2019).

We urge the committee to consult with IDRA and other non-partisan school funding experts to ascertain the acceptable weight to provide students with limited economic resources with everything that they need to thrive. This "opportunity weight" may be added as an additional weight category in the existing QBE (Quality Basic Education) formula or it may replace the current early intervention and remedial education program weights as a more targeted investment for students living in families with limited economic resources (McKillip & Farrie, 2019).

Georgia is home to the eighth largest emergent bilingual (known in state law as "ESOL") student population in the nation. Georgia's emergent bilingual programs like many others continue to suffer from staffing and resource shortages (Owens, 2020). We encourage the committee to ensure these students have all that they need by revisiting not only the current ESOL weight, but also the base amount of funding allotted for each student served.

Furthermore, we encourage the committee to ensure that the funding allotted for the education of these students is actually spent on their learning via ESOL-specific staffing or resources.

Finally, we encourage the committee to commission a comprehensive cost study to understand the current needs of emerging bilingual students (Hinojosa, March 2017).

Georgia is ranked in the bottom tenth of the nation for rural student achievement and has one of the lowest rates of per pupil spending in rural districts (Showalter, et al., 2019). We recommend that the committee fully fund categorical and other non-QBE grants, such as sparsity grants that support rural districts and communities with lower wealth.

For these priorities to take place, Georgia should increase overall funding for public education and eliminate the practice of providing public funds for students to attend private schools, *i.e.*, vouchers. The committee should use the funds currently dedicated to vouchers to reinvest into public schools that can meet the needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities.

We commend the committee's efforts to engage communities across Georgia, and we believe that this practice should be mandated for local schools to receive state funds. Just as state education leaders were required to solicit feedback for how public money should be invested under the American Rescue Plan (2021), local education agencies should be required to include the public in school budgeting and planning processes.

Finally, we encourage the committee to commission a comprehensive cost study to understand the needs of modern students (see Hinojosa, September 2017). Several other states have moved away from the QBE method of funding based on full time equivalent counts and instructional segments, to systems that are more student centered and fully reflect the needs of Georgia's diverse student body. Governor Nathan Deal's Education Reform Commission's report (2015) gives some examples of student-centered funding changes, and we encourage the committee to take those into account as they recommend additional changes. Thank you for your time and consideration, and we welcome the opportunity to provide additional support or resources to the committee.

## Citations

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